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Advanced Low Language Proficiency- An Achievable Goal?

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A standard of language proficiency recommended for world language preservice teachers has been set at advanced low as defined by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that foreign language teacher candidates in specific languages (e.g., French, German, Spanish) achieve the Advanced Low (AL) rating on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency interview (OPI) and the Writing Proficiency Test (WPT). They stipulate that 80% of preservice teachers must successfully demonstrate an AL level of language proficiency in order to achieve NCATE program accreditation. Many questions and concerns have emerged as a result of this policy that can benefit from national inquiry and discussion.

Many states have complied with this standard and set the bar for entry into the teaching profession at advanced low (AL) for western languages, such as Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Intermediate High (IH) for nonwestern languages, such as Japanese, Chinese and Russian. However, this policy has posed challenges for institutions of higher education (IHE) and has been received with mixed reviews and numerous questions about how this language proficiency policy was determined and how it will be assessed and documented. Several states have established a formal testing protocol with the ACTFL Testing Office, Language Testing International (LTI), to assess teacher candidate speaking and writing proficiency using the ACTFL OPI and WPT tests, while others have developed and administered their own assessments. In addition to these tests, international language exams such as DELF (France) and Test DaF (Germany) exist, but issues

of transferability have not been addressed, therefore precluding these assessments from recognition by IHE.

The ACTFL OPI, and WPT are the most cited and preferred measures for scholarly inquiry in the area of language acquisition and assessment. However, issues have emerged in the literature citing a lack of empirical research that has verified their validity and reliability (Salaberry, 2000) and the interview format rather than a conversation format has been called into question (Johnson, 2001). Matters of expense of the test and lack of feedback are additional areas of concern that have been voiced.

Why has Advanced Low been Designated as the Minimum Proficiency Standard for Beginning Language Teachers?

The AL level was based largely upon SLA theories that emphasize the importance of input in the target language that focuses on meaning and induces communicative interaction (Chambless, 2012). Speakers negotiate meaning with one another (Long, 1996), they make use of strategies such as turn-taking to enhance communication (Hall, 2010) and they participate in real-life conversations (Hall, 1999, 2004). According to the ACTFL Web site (<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageid=3385>), the AL level has been established for beginning teachers because in order to provide learning experiences that are in consonance with the expectations outlined in the student standards, foreign language teachers must be able to provide effective oral input that is characterized by fluency and spontaneity. Teachers must be able to speak in paragraphs and in major time

frames (i.e., present, past, future). Teachers at the AL level and higher have the ability to speak in spontaneous, connected discourse and thus are able to provide the type of classroom environment that is necessary for language acquisition to occur. Teachers who cannot speak in connected discourse and in major time frames do not have the tools necessary for addressing communication in the 3 modes as defined in the K-16 student standards. That is, they cannot provide target language input in the classroom at a level necessary to develop students' interpretive skills or to guide students in interacting with others in interpersonal contexts. Teachers who are not at least AL speakers have difficulty serving effectively as facilitators in helping students to negotiate meaning with one another and to function spontaneously in the TL. Teachers below the AL of oral proficiency are typically, at best, "textbook teachers" who need the answer key in order to function in the classroom.

It is difficult to counter these arguments. The foundational cornerstone of teaching competencies is strong content knowledge in one's chosen discipline. Research has documented that optimal use of L2 increases language proficiency among learners (Larsen-Freeman, 1985; Lightbown, 1991; Liu, 2008; Turnbull, 2001). It thus seems logical to assume that teachers who possess language skills that allow them to provide meaningful input and create a learning environment rich in language and culture will result in higher language learning among her students. There is, however, little empirical research to support the hypothesis that, all other things being equal, teachers with higher levels of language proficiency provide higher proficiency learning for their students.

In the scholarly literature, subject matter knowledge is explored primarily through a measure of content coursework credits; occasionally actual tests of subject-matter knowledge are administered to teachers. The latter are considered to be more valid than the former primarily because contextual evidence is rarely provided concerning the nature of the coursework or the performance of individuals in content-related courses. Research tends to indicate that what teachers know about what they are teaching has a positive effect on pupils' learning gains (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Harris & Sass, 2007; Monk, 1994).

An important issue regarding assessment is how preservice programs and teachers and language learners use proficiency assessments to ensure progress toward the AL proficiency goal. *The*

students themselves must play a pivotal role in this process as they self-assess their abilities against established standards. Systematic self-assessment of language skills as measured against a standard will ensure students are aware of their language strengths and weaknesses. Once language gaps are recognized, they can be addressed through a variety of options that support development toward advanced low proficiency (see Pearson, Fonseca-Greber, & Foell, 2006). When the end goal of AL proficiency is not integrated into the course work, nor made transparent throughout the preservice (see further down, consistency) and language programs, a one time high stakes proficiency test prior to student teaching is feared and test takers often express frustration that the test didn't really reflect what they can do with language (Burke, 2013). When a preservice teacher has achieved a strong GPA in his/her major, successfully completed field experiences and then fails to achieve an acceptable language proficiency score, there is surely a major disconnect in program goals. Having invested 4 years in the pursuit of their profession, these individuals are forced to reevaluate their careers. Consequently, several states have lowered the required proficiency level to IH (i.e., Ohio, Indiana, North Carolina, Wisconsin), arguing that the challenges to reach AL have been too great. In Ohio, which is experiencing a shortage of language teachers, fear exists that setting the bar at AL may discourage future teachers from entering the field. Utah, however, requires AL for all language teachers and AM for dual immersion schools. These states exemplify the dissonance that exists between professional beliefs and practical reality (Swender, 2003).

One of the major questions that emerges is whether exclusively classroom-based learning is able to bring students from zero proficiency to the AL level during a 4 year university experience. Swender (2003, p. 525) noted that "reaching the AL level of oral proficiency requires not just more foreign language study at the University, but also a minimum of 1 year of study abroad." Schulz (2002, p. 5) notes "it is generally accepted, and documented by research, that few learners will be able to jump the hurdle from an 'Intermediate' to an 'Advanced' rating on the ACTFL OPI scale without an experience abroad," an assertion supported by Fraga-Canadas (2010), Malone et al. (2003) and Sieloff-Magnan and Back (2007).

According to Ericsson and Smith's theory of expertise, excellence at performing a complex task (i.e., teaching, basketball, leadership) requires a

critical minimum level of practice (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). The magic number for true expertise has been set by researchers at 10,000 hours, or the equivalent of 10 years of practice. Much has been written and studied about excellent teaching and the variables involved in assessing “highly qualified” teachers. Shulman (1986) introduced the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) framework which represents the combination of content and pedagogy needed in order to understand how particular aspects of content matter are adequately represented for instruction. According to Shulman, content knowledge “refers to the amount and organization of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Pedagogy refers to how knowledge goes beyond the knowledge of subject matter, thus getting to the dimension of teaching. PCK thus encompasses both knowledge of subject matter as well as how that knowledge can be effectively taught. To determine someone’s ability, or PCK, by focusing on content alone may eliminate a potentially strong candidate from the teaching pool. For a profession as complex as teaching, perhaps a professional development plan that follows language teachers into the teacher induction period and beyond, that clearly identifies short- and long-term goals specific to language proficiency, might offer a pathway to continual language growth and meaningful professional development that can be documented and measured over time rather than through one single measurement at one point in time. It would seem that a teaching portfolio that presents multiple forms of evidence of teaching skills, knowledge and dispositions as determined by the NCATE/ACTFL Beginning Teacher Standards would provide a more comprehensive profile of the skills and knowledge of a beginning and developing teacher.

The responsibility for creating a successful language program that optimizes language proficiency within the IHE structure requires collaboration and cooperation across departments, colleges, and education agencies and organizations—not a lowering of standards!

Simply studying abroad will not necessarily improve language proficiency as individuals can choose not to integrate into the community and can surround themselves with friends who speak their native language. However, careful identification of stepping stones, or milestones that guide the language acquisition process and the study abroad experience can provide much direction if accompanied by self-assessment tools

that allow the students to document and, more importantly, reflect on their own learning process to assess their skills. This will lead to more critical thinking about what they must and can do to meet these milestones during the entire teacher education process. Consistent effort, goal setting and much practice, and a standard by which to measure progress will ensure that students are aware of their language abilities. The better teacher candidates understand what is expected of them to meet the requirement of speaking and writing at the AL level prior to seeking teaching certification, the more likely they are to achieve this goal (Ball, 2010). Much like the vertical model created by the AP College Board that posits that preparation for the AP exam should begin in level one language classes and be reinforced in each subsequent class to ensure success on the AP exam, the preparation for the ACTFL OPI and WPT must begin at the onset of the language experience, be modeled in each subsequent language class, and carried into the world language teacher education program.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

A powerful argument for setting the bar high at Advanced Low (AL) is research that shows that when teachers expect their students to show greater intellectual development, their students tend to conform to those expectations, a dynamic that Merton (1968) and Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) term “self-fulfilling prophecy” and the “Pygmalion effect.” Chambless (2012) reports that, based on 2 large-scale studies that examined proficiency levels of FL teacher candidates (Hamlyn, Surface, & Swender, 2007; Swender et al., 2011) the overwhelming majority who took the OPI, be it with a score of IH or AL, reached that standard. She concludes: “It is reasonable to assume that candidates tend to rise to the level that is expected of them” (Chambless, 2012, p. 151). The power of a teacher’s expectations to either encourage student achievement or discourage it has been demonstrated to exist at every level of schooling. Rhem (1999) interviewed Rosenthal about the role of self-fulfilling prophecy and posed the question of how the Pygmalion phenomenon may show up in higher education. Rosenthal responded: “In what you teach, if you think your students can’t achieve very much, are perhaps not too bright, you may be inclined to teach simple stuff, do a lot of drills, read from your lecture notes, give simple assignments calling for simplistic factual answers;

that's one important way it can show up" (Rhem, 1999, p. 2). Upon a thorough review of beginning and intermediate language textbooks it becomes evident that in many such books, low expectations are set for student achievement by "teaching the simple stuff," a focus on informal conversation and interaction, and "simple assignments that elicit simplistic factual answers."

We have seen this confirmed in language classrooms through teachers' use of the target language. Teachers who don't believe their students can comprehend the message if they use L2 in the classroom revert to using L1. An understanding of comprehensible input, how to apply this in the language classroom (e.g., dual coding in teaching vocabulary), and evaluating the effect, or impact on language learning and motivation would provide compelling reasons to reevaluate one's beliefs. Much as language and culture are intertwined, so are language development and language teaching. As has been pointed out in the research, teachers often teach the way they were taught. It is most important, therefore, that language professors use the latest language pedagogy/best practices in teaching language that models this for future teachers. When an individual experiences this firsthand, the process of understanding is significantly enhanced as there is a frame for reference from which one can unpack the experience and reevaluate one's beliefs.

Change is always uncomfortable, but necessary for continued growth. The decision to require an AL level of proficiency is a natural consequence of standards we have set for our profession and our students. Required will be a thoughtful examination of how we teach language, how we prepare teachers, how we collaborate across colleges in order to ensure that our students are optimally prepared to teach language and content with an ease of use that does not interfere with communication and that promotes a language and culture rich learning environment. Rather than viewing this as a top-down decision, it should be regarded as being at the heart of setting standards to ensure that all students have the same opportunity to learn and be optimally prepared for life in the 21st century. All constituents (learners, teachers, language departments, education departments) have a role in ensuring that AL is not an elusive, but both a desirable and an achievable goal.

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